

## Why we need Governors

There is a disquiet in Raj Nivases and Bhavans today. What does the Constitution Bench's order betoken? Are we, Lieutenant Governors and Governors must be thinking, redundant? Are we a mere ornament, like the chandelier overhead or the carpet underfoot? Is there nothing to our office, to us, than having an ADC escort us, a liveried chaperon wait on us, and callers address us as 'Your Excellency'? Is signing the files that come to us in 'aid and advice' from our Chief Ministers and Ministers, receiving the President and Vice President and Prime Minister when they arrive at the airport, driving with them into the city, and then, after hosting a banquet for them, seeing them off our sole function?

### Message from Bengal

The most telling answer to those questions has been provided by M.K. Gandhi. On October 30, 1946, Gandhi was in Calcutta. Consistently with his sense of etiquette, he called on the Governor. The last Governor of undivided — and communally disturbed — Bengal, Frederick Burrows, asked him, "What would you like me to do?" A popular government headed by Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy had been installed in the State and maintaining peace in the State was now the responsibility of the elected ministry. The answer to "What would you like me to do?" was courteous, but crisp. "Nothing, Your Excellency," Gandhi said. He meant that after the British declaration to quit, the Governor's position in India's provinces was that of a constitutional head of state and he must "let" the representative government do its duty.

Gandhi's advice was consistent with Walter Bagehot's dictum about the Crown having 'the right to be consulted, the right to encourage, the right to warn' but not to be the engine of government. And it anticipated the Supreme Court's July 4, 2018 order. But did he mean that they should go, their offices and their carpets rolled up?

He did not.

And so, returning to the question posed at the head of this column, are Governors then a mere and rather costly superfluity? Is the Governor then, in a word, just a figurehead?

Certainly not.

Now is that not odd, very odd?

Can someone, something or anyone, anything, that has no 'role' be yet valuable?

Curiously enough, yes.

### Constituent Assembly debates

During the Constituent Assembly's deliberations on the office of the Governor, the thoughtful S.N. Agrawal, then Principal of a College at Wardha, later better known as Shriman Narayan, a dedicated Gandhian who was later to be a Governor himself, reflected on it. In the last weeks of 1947 he wrote in an article: "In my opinion there is no necessity for a Governor. The Chief Minister should be able to take his place and peoples' money to the tune of Rs 5000 a month for the sinecure of the Governor will be saved." Gandhi, whose advice to Burrows we have noted, responded to Agrawal in *Harijan* (December 21, 1947) as follows: "There is much to be said in favour of the argument advanced by Principal Agrawal about the appointment of provincial Governors. I must confess that I have not been able to follow the proceedings of the Constituent

Assembly... Much as I would like to spare every pice of the public treasury it would be bad economy to do away with provincial Governors and regard Chief Ministers as a perfect equivalent. Whist I would resent much power of interference to be given to Governors, I do not think that they should be mere figureheads. They should have enough power enabling them to influence ministerial policy for the better. In their detached position they would be able to see things in their proper perspective and thus prevent mistakes by their cabinets. Theirs must be an all-pervasive moral influence in their provinces.”

This has to be one of the best summations of the value of that office and, indeed, of the difference between ‘interference’ and ‘influence’.

A look at the attendees at one of the early conferences of Governors on May 8, 1949 would show present in the domed hall an array of Governors, each strong-minded but self-composed, not interested in putting his Chief Minister in the shade or himself in the limelight: the industrialist Homi Mody (United Provinces), the veteran non-Congress leader M.S. Aney (Bihar), the free-thinking lawyer Asaf Ali (Orissa), the old-time Congressman K.N. Katju (West Bengal), Bhavsinhji, the sagacious Maharaja of Bhavnagar (Madras), the ICS veteran C.M. Trivedi (Punjab). They did not look upon themselves as figureheads who could do nothing, nor as martinets who could do any and everything. They knew that they lacked power, but wielded influence, influence to do good, as the Governor General, Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister of the day wanted them to, “without friction and without prejudice to the march of democracy.”

The key words to be taken away from those are ‘interference’ versus ‘influence’, ‘detached position’ versus ‘figurehead’, ‘perspective’ versus ‘prejudice’ and overarching all this, the key phrase: ‘all-pervasive moral influence’.

Vital positions

Governors and, for that matter, the President of India are vital, not because they can hold up or hold back anything — indeed, they should not and cannot — but because they can and should exert the moral voltage, the sense of the rightness and wrongness of things that would underscore the republican credence and democratic credentials of elected governments.

This is where the choice of the incumbent becomes crucial. I have given a few of the names of the first crop of Governors attending the Governors’ Conference in May 1949. ‘But,’ the despondent cynic may ask, ‘do we have such persons in our midst today?’ At first pulse, it may seem we do not, and that we are going through a drought in stature. But reflection would correct that thought. Women and men in education, commerce, administration, science, medicine, law and public life within and outside of politics, across parties, can surely be found who, as well-wishers, will strengthen and not threaten elected governments working ‘for the better’.

Chief Ministers and Prime Ministers head the government. Governors and Presidents head the state. Governments govern, states sustain. And in a democratic republic, the people power both. They do so, wanting the Chief Minister to act conscientiously and the Governor to act constitutionally, to ensure self-government is good government, *swa-raj* is also *su-raj*.

The country has to congratulate the Aam Aadmi Party and its leader, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, for having elicited from the [Supreme Court a benchmark ruling](#). But it can do more. It can reflect on how, as a Chief Minister actuates a popular mandate, the Governor exercises that “all-pervasive moral influence”, both together providing the people in their jurisdiction the assurance that they are in secure and mutually composed, not conflicted, hands.

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